

TITLE OF THE SPECIFICATION

Graft polymers as gas hydrate inhibitors

The invention relates to the use of graft polymers as gas hydrate inhibitors.

Background

It is known that gas hydrates, also termed clathrate hydrates, can form under certain conditions in media which comprise gas molecules, such as CO₂ or hydrocarbons, e.g. C₁-C₄-alkanes, and water. These gas hydrates are composed of the gas molecules mentioned surrounded by a "cage" of water molecules. Gas hydrates of this type also occur when water is present in mineral oil mixtures or in natural gas mixtures and, for example during transportation, they can lead to blocking of the pipelines.

To prevent this, gas hydrate inhibitors are added to the mineral oil mixtures or natural gas mixtures.

WO 96/41784 and WO 96/41785 disclose gas hydrate inhibitors composed of a copolymer of N-methyl-N-vinylacetamide (VIMA).

US 5 420 370, US 5 432 292, WO 94/12 761 and WO 95/32 356 disclose polymeric additives for clathrate hydrate inhibition in liquid systems. These have a comonomer with a lactam ring in the polymer.

Polyvinylcaprolactam in particular, and also copolymers of polyvinylcaprolactam with, for example, vinylpyrrolidone, have a cloud point when dissolved in water, i.e. a certain temperature at which the polymer precipitates (inverse solubility). For pure polyvinylcaprolactam this is from about 30 to 35°C. A low cloud point such as this is sometimes disadvantageous for the gas hydrate inhibitor application, since the polymer can precipitate in the gas/oil water phase which is to be conveyed if the temperature of this phase (i.e. including the water of this phase) is high, as is very likely to occur in practice. Use is therefore widely made of copolymers of vinylcaprolactam with, for example, vinylpyrrolidone, or else with other hydrophilic monomers which raise the cloud point, including, for example, ionic monomers which have ionic groups such as carboxyl.

particular linking unit spacer.

Graft polymers per se are known from the prior art. For example, the German Patents DBP 1077430, 1081229, 1084917 and 1094457 describe processes for preparing various graft polymers, such as graft polymers of polyvinyl esters or modified polyvinyl alcohols. EP 235 038 discloses the use of graft polymers based on polyalkylene oxides as graying inhibitors. EP 44 995 discloses graft polymers of PVA.

Summary of the Invention

It is an object of the present invention to provide polymers which can be used as gas hydrate inhibitors and can be prepared more cost-effectively and can be varied to meet a variety of industrial requirements. The structure of these polymers must be such that they interact with differing interfaces or surfaces, in particular in complex gas-water mixtures and at a variety of temperatures with the result that no gas hydrates form, and it must be possible to use readily available monomers to build up the polymers.

We have found that this object is achieved by using graft polymers as gas hydrate inhibitors.

Detailed Description of the Invention

The idea of using graft polymers as gas hydrate inhibitors enables individual polymer components, such as the base polymer (also termed the graft base), and the monomers to be grafted on, to be ideally matched to one another as requirements dictate, inter alia in terms of their spatial arrangement.

The graft polymers in their entirety may be water-soluble or merely water-dispersible. As long as a dispersion of the polymers in water can be produced using the usual methods, the graft polymers used may per se also be water-insoluble, but preference is given to water-soluble graft polymers. The graft polymers used according to the invention may also be "comb polymers".

The graft base of the graft polymers may be either a hydrophilic polymer or a hydrophobic polymer, preferably a hydrophilic polymer. Polymers with a hydrophobic part and a hydrophilic part may also be used. There is a wide variety of possible monomers for the units grafted on. It is precisely this variability of the system which is an advantage of the present invention.

Solvents which may be used for the gas hydrate inhibitors are water, alcohols, glycols, and other polar solvents. The graft polymers may also be used in non-polar solvents.

synergistic effects are possible with some solvents (see also WO 98/19980). Solvents with a high flashpoint and a low ground water pollution classification, e.g. water or ethylene glycol, are preferred for handling reasons, e.g. to reduce safety risks 5 and for reasons of toxicity.

The possibility of using water is seen as a particular advantage of the use according to the invention of the graft polymers.

- 10 However, it is also possible to use ethylene glycol, which is chemically closely related to some preferred graft polymers. Low-molecular-weight polyalkylene glycols, in particular polyethylene glycol, may be added subsequently as solvent (for viscosity reasons). Their advantage is that they have a high 15 flashpoint (about 111°C in the case of ethylene glycol) combined with good aquatic toxicity values.

- A polyalkylene glycol (liquid and low-molecular-weight), preferably polyethylene glycol, may even be used as solvent for 20 any organic initiator (organic peroxide) which may be used in preparing the graft polymers, or for monomer which is not liquid at room temperature, for example vinylcaprolactam.

- One way of making the graft polymers soluble or at least 25 dispersible in water or in other polar solvents is to use a hydrophilic graft base for the graft polymer. Possible graft bases are polyalkylene glycols, polyvinyl alcohols, polyvinylamides, polyvinylpyrrolidone, polyethers, polyesters, polyurethanes, polyacrylamide, polysaccharides, e.g. starch, 30 alginates, pectins, natural rubbers, caseins, gelatin, cellulose ethers, e.g. methylcellulose, starch ethers, polyalkyleneimines, polycarboxylic acids, polyvinylsulphonic acids or polyvinylphosphonic acids or copolymers of these. Preference is given to polyalkylene glycols, in particular polyethylene 35 glycols, polyethyleneimines, polyvinyl alcohols, polyvinylpyrrolidone and polyvinylamine.

- Possible hydrophobic base polymers are: polyalkylene glycols, such as ethylene oxide-propylene oxide copolymers or ethylene 40 oxide-caprolactone oxide block copolymers, polyethers,

- ethers, polyvinyl formals, polyvinyl acetals, polyvinyl chloride 45 or other halogenated polyvinyl compounds, e.g. polyvinylidene

polyurethanes, silicones, polycarbonate, polyterephthalate, cellulose or cellulose esters or polyoxymethylene or copolymers of these.

- 5 Certain polymers may, as a result of their composition, have both hydrophilic and hydrophobic character. The skilled worker knows how to select the composition to achieve this in a particular case.
- 10 Possible monomers for the units grafted on may be water-soluble or water-insoluble. Preferred monomers are N-vinyl lactams, N-vinyl amides, in particular N-vinyl-N-methylacetamide, acrylates, acrylamides and/or vinyl esters, preferably N-vinyl lactams, in particular N-vinyl caprolactam.
- 15 The units grafted on generally make up from 10 to 90% by weight, preferably from 25 to 75% by weight, particularly preferably from 40 to 60% by weight of the graft copolymers.
- 20 It is particularly advantageous to use graft polymers which have a hydrophilic base polymer and N-vinyl lactams as the unit grafted on.

- The invention therefore also provides graft polymers with a graft
- 25 base of hydrophilic polymers having at least one heteroatom in the main chain and with N-vinyl caprolactam as the unit grafted on, and also, if desired, another monomer mentioned above.

- According to the invention preference is given to graft polymers
- 30 in which the graft base is a polyalkylene glycol, a polyalkyleneimine, a polyether or a polyurethane. Particular preference is given to polyethylene glycol as base polymer and N-vinyl caprolactam or N-vinyl caprolactam/vinyl acetate as monomer grafted on.

- 35 The graft polymers used according to the invention can be prepared in a manner known per se, e.g. as described in DE 1 077 430 or 1 084 917.

- 40 In these publications a mixture made from monomer/vinyl

- and the remainder is added via a feed and - if desired with
- 45 addition of solvent - polymerized to completion.

The process described in EP 0 219 048 (page 2, lines 49 ff.) may also be used. In this, polyalkylene oxide is, for example, the initial charge and monomer (vinyl acetate) and initiator are added all at once, in portions or continuously. Another process
5 suitable for preparing the graft polymers used according to the invention is that described in EP 0 285 038 (polyalkylene oxide, vinylpyrrolidone, vinyl ester).

- A preferred way of preparing the graft polymers used according to
10 the invention is to heat the entire amount of, or most of, the base polymer, e.g. polyethylene glycol of molar mass typically from 200 to 40,000 g/mol, preferably from 600 to 10,000 g/mol, particularly preferably from 1500 to 6000 g/mol, in a stirred reactor until it becomes liquid, if appropriate.
- 15 The monomer, e.g. vinylcaprolactam - if desired mixed with a solvent, e.g. ethylene glycol - and a peroxidic initiator (e.g. tert-butyl 2-ethylperoxihexanoate) - if desired mixed with a solvent, e.g. methanol - are then metered in from separate feeds over a period of several hours while the initial charge is at,
20 for example, 80°C. If the viscosity becomes excessive during the course of the reaction an appropriate amount of a solvent, preferably water or ethylene glycol, may be added. The addition may take place either at an earlier stage prior to the grafting reaction or at the start of this reaction, but preferably at the
25 latest possible juncture during the grafting reaction and ideally not until the grafting reaction is complete. The amount of solvent metered in should be kept as small as possible.

After completion of the reaction polymerization may be continued,
30 e.g. by adding another initiator. The pressure and temperature may be raised for this, if desired.

The finished polymer may be diluted with any desired solvent. It is advisable to dilute with water or ethylene glycol or with a mixture of the two.

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In many cases the conversion of the grafting reaction may best be determined indirectly by determining the cloud point of the graft polymer and comparing with an ungrafted polymer. For this the polymer is usually dried and an aqueous solution, for example, is
40 prepared from the dry polymer. The clouding of the solution is

The cloud point may be determined to DIN 51 761.

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The graft polymers may be used, also in combination with other suitable agents, as gas hydrate inhibitors.

These other agents may be other polymers, such as
5 hydroxyalkylcelluloses, polyvinylpyrrolidone or polyvinylcaprolactam, or else alcohols, such as methanol, ethanol or ethylene glycol, or water-soluble salts, preferably in amounts of from 1 to 3.5% by weight, based on the weight of the entire liquid system.

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The invention also provides a process for preventing or reducing the formation of gas hydrates in liquid or gaseous systems, which comprises adding a graft polymer to the liquid systems.

15 The K values of the graft polymers used according to the invention (determined as described by Fikentscher, Cellulose Chemie, 13, 58-64, 71-74, 1932; 1% strength aqueous solution, 20°C, $K = k \cdot 10^3$) are from 10 to 120, preferably from 15 to 90, in particular from 20 to 60. The molecular weights of the graft
20 polymers (M_w) are from 2000 to 1,000,000, preferably from 500 to 300,000, particularly preferably from 10,000 to 100,000.

The graft polymers which can be used according to the invention as gas hydrate inhibitors may be used either in pure aqueous
25 solution or else in solvent mixtures, e.g. water/alcohol, in particular ethylene glycol. After removal of the solvent and, if desired, drying, the polymers may also be used in powder form. If the graft polymers have hydrophilic character powders of this type can easily be redispersed or, respectively, redissolved for
30 the purposes of the invention at their point of use in media in which water is present and in which gas hydrate tends to form.

The polymers are added to the liquid systems, i.e. to the mineral oil mixtures or natural gas mixtures, in the usual amounts which
35 the skilled worker will adapt to the circumstances of each case.

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Examples

Example 1

5			g	% by weight	
	Initial charge	Pluriol E 6000	300	50	
	Feed 1	vinylcaprolactam	150	25	
10		vinyl acetate	150	25	
	Feed 2	tert-butyl 2-ethyl- peroxyhexanoate (98 % strength) methanol	4 = 1.3 % 30		based on monomers
15	Feed 3	demineralized water	900		

Pluriol E 6000: polyethylene glycol with molecular weight 6000

- 20 The initial charge was stirred at 150 rpm in a 2 l HWS mixer under a slow flow of nitrogen and heated to an external temperature of 100°C.

- 25 Once the polyethylene glycol with molecular weight 6000 (Pluriol E 6000, BASF AG) in the initial charge had been completely melted, 10% of feed 2 was added to the initial charge and stirred for 5 min. Feeds 1 and 2 were then added dropwise, in each case over a period of 5 h. Once the feeds had been completed polymerization was continued for 3 h. Feed 3 was then added over
30 a period of 30 min, followed by cooling.

Solids content in % by weight: 38.1

K value 21.6 (measured at 1 % strength in ethanol)

35 Example 2

Preparation as in Example 1, experiment at 100°C external temperature. Cf. Table 1.

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Example 3

		g	% by weight	
5	Initial charge	PTHF 1000 *	180	30
		Partial quantity of feed 2	7	
	Feed 1	vinyl acetate	60	10
10		vinylpyrrolidone	315	52.5
	Feed 2	tert-butyl 2-ethyl-peroxyhexanoate (98 % strength)	4.5	=1.1 % based on monomers
		methanol	45	
15	Feed 3	vinylpyrrolidone	45	7.5
	Feed 4	tert-butyl 2-ethyl-peroxyhexanoate (98 % strength)	1.3	=0.3 % based on monomers
		methanol	13	
20	Feed 5	demineralized water	380	

* polytetrahydrofuran with molecular weight 1000 (hydrophobic)

25 The experiment was carried out in a 6 l stirred Juvo reactor. The reactor was pressurized three times with nitrogen at 10 bar. The initial charge with the partial quantity of feed 2 was heated to an internal temperature of about 95°C. At 95°C feeds 1 and 2 were begun. Feed 1 was metered in within a period of 6 h and feed 2 within a period of 8 h. Once feed 1 had been completed feed 3 was
 30 metered in within a period of 1.5 h. Once feed 2 had been completed polymerization was continued for 1 h. Feed 4 was metered in over a period of 2 h (still) at 95°C. Once feed 4 had been completed polymerization was continued for a further 3 h at 95°C. Feed 5 was then added over a period of 30 min, followed by
 35 cooling.

Example 4

40 Preparation as in Example 1, experiment at 90°C external

Example 5

Preparation as in Example 1 (unlike in Example 1 PTHF 250 (polytetrahydrofuran with molecular weight 250, hydrophilic) is a clear solution and requires no melting). Experiment at 100°C external temperature. Cf. Table 1.

Example 6

Preparation as in Example 1, experiment at 80°C external temperature. Cf. Table 1.

Since the experiment gave a very high viscosity after feeds 1 and 2 had been completed, a partial quantity of feed 3 (300 g of water) was added straight away during the further polymerization. The remaining amount of water was added prior to cooling.

Table 1

Compositions for the experiments of the examples

	Ex.	Initiator		GB**		VCap	VAc	VP	K value ***	SC
25		Type	% by wt.*		% by wt.	% by wt.	% by wt.	% by wt.		% by wt.
30	1	tBEPHA	1.3	Pluriol E 6000	50	25	25		21.6	38.1
	2	tBEPHA	1.6	Pluriol E 6000	60	40			22.8	40.1
	3	tBEPHA	1.4	PTHF 1000	30		10	60	22.9	38.5
	4	tBPPIv	1.3	Pluriol E 6000	50	40	10		23.9	39.3
35	5	tBEPHA	1.2	PTHF 250	35	30		35	22.5	40.1
	6	tBPPIv	1.4	Pluriol E 6000	50	30		20	26.4	40.4

* based on monomer

40 ** GB = graft base

45 tBEPHA tert-butyl 2-ethylperoxyhexanoate

PTHF polytetrahydrofuran

Pluriol Pluronic polyoxyethylene-polyoxypropylene block copolymer

VCap vinylcaprolactam
 VAc vinyl acetate
 VP vinylpyrrolidone

5 SC Solids content

Table 2

Freezing point results (ball stop method) and cloud point (0.5%
 10 by weight of polymer in water)

Example	Ball stop °C	Cloud point °C	Comments
15 Comp. 1	4.0	---	Ball stop zero value (no polymer)
Comp. 2	0.5	32	Vinylcaprolactam homopolymer (K value 20)
Comp. 3	3.0	> 100	Vinylpyrrolidone homopolymer (K value 20)
20 1	2.0	80	
2	1.5	90	Minimal clouding at 50°C (disappears again)
3	2.5	90	Slight clouding
4	1.5	90	Minimal clouding at 40°C (disappears again)
25 5	1.0	75	
6	1.5	65	

The freezing point was determined by the "Ball stop method" using
 30 a test method similar to that described in Example 1 of
 W095/32356.

This method relates to the testing of freezing points of water.
 THF mixtures resulting from adding a variety of polymers
 35 (demonstrating hydrate formation). These are frozen at 0.5%
 strength in a water/THF (81/19% by weight) mixture.

The following equipment and reagents are needed to determine the
 freezing point of a variety of polymers (water/THF) mixtures:

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- Multifix constant stirrer
- 45 - holder for test tubes (5 ml)

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- small stainless steel balls to improve mixing in the test tube

A 0.5% strength solution of the polymer to be studied was
5 prepared in water/THF (81/19). The test tube was filled to two thirds of its capacity, a small stainless steel ball was added and the tube was sealed and secured in the test-tube holder. The measurement was started at 4°C bath temperature and with a rotation rate of 20 rpm, and the temperature was lowered by 0.5°C
10 hourly until the sample had frozen or, respectively, the steel ball was no longer moving within the test tube, or 0°C had been reached. A blank sample was run in parallel with each measurement.

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